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THE LITERARY INFLUENCE OF ST. JEROME

Few in our western world have wielded a wider or a deeper literary influence than St. Jerome. This ancient doctor of the Church, whose busy pen slipped from his failing fingers fifteen centuries ago (A. D. 420), may be said to be the father of Christian Latin prose, and through it he had a large share in framing the Romance dialects that sprung from it. Even the Teutonic languages, widely as they differ from the Romance tongues, are yet impregnated with biblical metaphors and allusions; they possess whole hosts of words connoting Christian practices, ceremonies, doctrines, liturgical and ritual observances; and all these exotic and foreign turns of expression have flowed in on them, certainly not from the Semitic languages, nor even directly from Greek versions of the Scripture, but from the Latin version, the so-called Vulgate of St. Jerome. Not that Jerome was a deep and original thinker like Augustine. He never could have conceived much less written *The City of God,* which may be said to be the *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle* of the fifth century. Neither could he have written those immortal *Confessions,* that touching autobiography on the moving pages of which the tears seem still to glisten. Nor was he a deep and accurate theologian like Aquinas, his incursions into that field were not always fortunate; nor was he an admirable orator like Chrysostom, able to touch the hearts of the multitude and make them vibrate in unison with the highest ideals of devotion and piety; nor did he possess the supreme literary skill of Bossuet or of Newman; his style and writings possess the defects that belong to the ages of decadence, and in addition some faults peculiar to himself. But he was a very great scholar, undoubtedly the greatest of his age; a very considerable man of letters, a tireless worker; and notwithstanding the shortcomings and limitations just mentioned, his translation of the Scriptures is a magnificent achievement, tested now and approved by the use and encomiums of fifty generations. I may remark in passing that the anglican scholar, Bishop Westcott, in his admirable commentary on the Gospel of St. John, thinks

that Protestants have lost a great deal owing to their neglect of the Vulgate version. His words, weighty and unexpected, are worth quoting verbatim. "Throughout the notes I have quoted the renderings of the Latin Vulgate in the hope of directing more attention to the study of it. It seems to me that we have lost much in every way from our neglect of a version which has influenced the theology of the West more profoundly than we know."[1]

The Latin of the golden ages, that of Cicero and the Augustans was a tongue of admirable precision and exactness. It lent itself naturally to epigrams, to pithy pregnant sayings full of meat. It possessed also a severe majesty and solemn, sonorous cadence well adapted for declamation and oratory. But at the same time it was curiously stiff, stilted and unmalleable; while its poverty in abstract substantives unfitted it as a medium for philosophical speculation. It was absolutely incapable of expressing, except perhaps by the most awkward periphrases, specifically Christian ideas. Such words as *episcopus, presbyter, diaconus, Christus, Paraclitus, baptisma, anathema* had no place in classic Latin. They had to be borrowed from the Greek, and frequently at first were transcribed in Greek characters. Other words such as *Salvator, Incarnatio, Resurrectio, Trinitas;* innumerable abstract nouns like *compassio, ingratitudo, immortalitas, impossibilitas* were coined by the Christians in order to express more or less happily the new ideas and viewpoints their Faith had brought into the world. These words were of course current in that ancient world wherein they had been moulded. But without the Vulgate they would never have become the heritage of the whole Christian republic, and above all these words would never have passed with but slight modification into all the Christian languages of today.

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[1] WESTCOTT. *The Gospel according to St. John*, vol. I, p. cxciv. Side by side with Westcott should be placed the dictum of another Protestant scholar: Les siècles ont conféré à la Vulgate une consecration, qui n'est pas certes d'ordre scientifique, mais qui est un fait qu'il serait bien peu scientifique de ne pas constater. Son texte à force de charrier les emotions le plus profondes de l'humanité occidentale s'en est impregné: ce sont ces douleurs, ces élans, ces espoirs qu'on revit dans son latin sonore, et en les revivant chaque generation qui vient les consacre à nouveau P. SABATIER, *S. François d' Assise.* Preface P. XIII.

Again, it would be difficult to find a greater antithesis than the Latin and the Semitic methods of building up a sentence. The Latin makes one main statement from which branch out various subordinate statements. These are linked and attached to their parent by means of conjunctions, participles and adverbs. Thus the clauses and sub-clauses have a strongly marked relation both to the main sentence and to one another. The Semitic writer views his subject differently, It unfolds itself before him in a series of parallel sentences loosely strung together by a simple copula, and all aligned, so to speak, on the same plane. Moreover, he loves to dwell on the same idea in a very slightly changed form of words. The leading idea stressed, reiterated, seems to charm his ear as the refrain of a song or of a piece of poetry does ours. This peculiarity of parallelism is one of the chief devices of Hebrew poetry, which is extremely noticeable in the Psalms, and no less so in the Gospel of St. John. The biblical writers also delight in the boldest and most unusual metaphors. The oriental has an exuberant, riotous fancy as far removed as possible from the staid and sober tropes of Roman and Latin gravity. It is the singular and startling merit of St. Jerome that he was able so to stretch and enlarge the rigid Latin moulds as not to lose the very exotic and precious liquor of the original, nor yet destroy the vessel into which the transfusion took place. The saint thus accomplished the apparently impossible task of putting new wine into old skins to the infinite advantage of each. This achievement alone would stamp St. Jerome as signally and exceptionally gifted both from a literary and linguistic standpoint. Hence Ozanam does not hesitate to call him "the master of Christian prose for all the following centuries."[2]

The saint destined by Providence for such a monumental work received also from Providence the talents and the opportunities requisite to accomplish his task worthily. As a mere youth he was sent to Rome, where he studied under the famous grammarian Donatus, and he relates how his teacher when lecturing on Terence employed the striking words, which have been in the mouths of jealous literati ever since: *pereant qui*

[2]*Civilisation au V^me Siècle*, vol. II, p. 101.

nostra ante nos dixerunt. During his stay in Rome he read the Greek philosophers, and with infinite pains and labor gathered together a library. His next station was Treves, then a renowned center of Gallo-Roman culture, and here also he first felt the call to a new life. He lingered for a short while at Aquileia, thence embarking for Syria, meditating remorsefully on the past, and reading assiduously Plautus and Cicero. Meanwhile he was stricken down by a violent attack of fever, and in the prostration of his illness dreamed that he had died, and his soul was summoned before the judgment-seat of God. An awful voice asked him, "Who art thou?" To which he replied, "a Christian." "It is false," answered the pitiless, inexorable voice, "thou art no Christian; thou art a Ciceronian; where the treasure is, there is the heart also!" The crisis passed, the patient returned from dream or vision land to matter-of-fact reality, but from that day forward (A. D. 374) Jerome devoted himself to the salvation of his soul. For five years he buried himself in the desert between Antioch and the Euphrates, spending his time in prayer, the transcription of manuscripts and the acquisition of Hebrew. This last task taxed his powers of endurance and self-discipline to the uttermost. More than once he was about to abandon his purpose in disgust, but he steeled himself to redoubled efforts and in the end acquired a knowledge not only of Hebrew but of Chaldean as well, unexampled in the Church of that day, and for many centuries after. Even today when modern methods of teaching and the instruments and appliances of learning have well nigh reached perfection, the acquisition of Hebrew is not considered either an easy or an agreeable task. But St. Jerome learned these difficult Semitic tongues without the aid of either grammar or dictionary, without vowels, points, or any diacritic marks whatever. The only method at his command was the oral instructions of some Jewish rabbis, who charged exorbitantly for their lessons, and who would teach him only in secret and by night for fear of the resentment of their compatriots; and his own laborious plodding through the *Hexapla* of Origin. His achievement in the face of such difficulties must be considered a marvel of acumen, and of patient unrelenting industry. Years later, writing to the monk Rusticus he told of his struggles and

disappointments in the pursuit of learning. "I entrusted myself to the teaching of a certain brother, who had been converted from Judaism, that, after the keen intellect of Quintilian, the rivers of Cicero, the dignity of Fronto, the gentleness of Pliny, I might learn the Hebrew alphabet and con its strident and panting vocables. My conscience, and that of those who lived with me, is witness of all the labor I spent on that study, the difficulty I endured, how often I despaired, how often I threw up the study, and in my zeal took it up again; and I thank God that, from the bitter seed, I cull the sweet fruit of literature."[3] But St. Jerome was not contented with the teaching of this converted "brother." At a later period he hired the services of a Jew called Baranina, who like Nicodemus would come to him only by night.[4] To make sure that he understood thoroughly the Hebrew text of the Book of Chronicles he engaged the services of a famous rabbi of Tiberias. Thus he spared no effort of time or trouble to make himself master of the original idioms of the Sacred Record.

In 380 we find him at Constantinople, where he studied under St. Gregory Nazianzus, and perfected his knowledge of Greek. At this time he translated into Latin the Chronicle of Eusebius; Jerome's version is still extant, but the original, apart a few fragments, has perished. After two years' stay at the center of Christian Greek culture, he proceeded to Rome, to act as secretary to Pope St. Damasus (382–385). Jerome, urged thereto by the Pontiff, now began his life labor, the revision of the Latin Bible. He also made the acquaintance of St. Paula, her daughters and other members of her family. The lives of these great ladies and great saints were thenceforward inextricably interwoven with his own, and many of his subsequent literary labors—his translations of various books of the Bible, his commentaries on difficult and disputed passages—were undertaken at their instance and prosecuted owing to their incessant promptings. The death of his patron St. Damasus made Jerome's position at Rome undesirable. In 385 he left

[3] *Ep. CXXV ad Rusticum Monachum.* MIGNE, *Patr., Lat.* tome 22, col. 1079.

[4] *Quo labore, quo pretio Baraninam nocturnam habui praeceptorem! Timebat enim Judaeos et mihi alterum exhibebat Nicodemum.*

Ep. LXXXIV. MIGNE, 22, col. 745.

for Palestine, and the next year being joined by St. Paula and her daughter, and being aided also by their abundant wealth, he built a monastery at Bethlehem, where he spent the remaining thirty-four years of his life in unceasing literary labor. Near his monastery Paula erected a convent and a hospice for pilgrims, devoting her spare hours to the study of the Scriptures. In 416 his monastery was attacked by the Pelagians, and the incursions of the barbarians disturbed the peace of his last years. He outlived nearly all his intimate friends and coworkers. Heliodorus and Nepotianus, Pammachius and Marcella, Asella, Paula and Fabiola all went to their reward before their father. Eustochium, St. Paula's daughter, the dearest of his spiritual children, passed away in 418, and was buried beside her mother in the cave of Bethlehem. The younger Paula, niece of Eustochium, and the younger Melania established themselves at Bethlehem about this time, and perhaps their hands may have closed the old man's eyes. There is no letter of his extant for the year 420, and it is not unlikely that he died, as Prosper of Aquitaine asserts, September 30, 420. Of St. Jerome's letters Amedée Thierry well says: "with the correspondence of Jerome our close acquaintance with the Christian society of that time so gracious, so ecstatic and so learned dies away. A few more letters of Augustine, a few also of Paulinus of Nola, and night falls upon the west."[5]

The outstanding feature of St. Jerome's letters is their vividness and actuality. The writer really converses with his correspondents and is eager to pour out his very soul to them. He has a message to deliver, a sermon to preach, and he is not satisfied until he has got his thronging thoughts off his mind. He knows the Scripture so perfectly that, like St. Bernard, every line he writes is impregnated with its words, images and phraseology, and one catches frequent glimpses of the man of letters, perfectly acquainted with profane learning. Quotations from Virgil abound in his correspondence; and in the very letter (Ep. 52) where he blames himself for a too lavish use of rhetoric, he refers to the philosophers Pythagoras, Democritus, Plato and Zeno; to the poets, Homer,

[5] Quoted by FARRAR, *Lives of the Fathers*, Vol. II, p. 290.

Hesiod, Simonides, Sophocles and others. His letter to Eustochium (Ep. 22) contains the famous passage describing with uncanny vividness the dreadful temptations which beset him in the desert. The letters recounting the virtues of Paula, the death of Blesilla, the funeral of Fabiola are most touching and beautiful; many letters contain passages of the highest spirituality. This part of Jerome's correspondence I would compare with Lacordaire's letters to his friends and to his pupils. And I imagine also these must be the letters which inspired St. Theresa with such a veneration for the scholar of Bethlehem. Because other pieces occur of a vastly different tone, full of satire and sarcasm, nor does Jerome hesitate to affix ugly nicknames to those persons whom he dislikes. In Ep. 50, Jerome literally "handles without gloves" a young monk, who, he heard, was criticizing him. The letter to Eustochium already referred to contains a most scathing indictment of the hypocrites and parasites, who infest the religious world, and make use of sacred things to procure their temporal advancement. In Ep. 27 he speaks very severely of the clergy of Rome. An opponent, whose name was Vigilantius, Jerome adorns with the title of "Dormitantius;" his former friend Rufinus becomes after their estrangement "the Grunter;" frequently he applies the term "mad dogs" to his enemies. Those who decried his translations of the Scriptures he calls "two-legged asses, in whose ears he would blow with a trumpet." "A lyre," he says, "is of no use to a donkey; but that they may not, in their usual fashion, accuse me of pride, I reply that I am not so stupid, nor of such crass rusticity (which they take for the only piety, calling themselves disciples of fishermen, as though ignorance were a proof of sanctity) as to have thought that any of the Lord's words were either to be corrected, or were not divinely inspired." These traits and this impatience of contradiction recall irresistibly Carlyle. St. Jerome possesses in common with all superior writers, the knack of coining striking phrases, which stick in the memory and become the common property of the educated. Here are a few examples of his power of hitting the nail exactly on the head:

Ingemuit totus orbis et Arianum se esse miratus est.[6]

[6] The whole world groaned, and was amazed to find itself Arian.

Nec ob Sardorum tantum mastrucam Dei Filium descendisse.[7]
Consensus totius orbis instar praecepti.[8]

The only edition of St. Jerome within my reach was Migne's. But a new and critical edition of his Letters is being produced in the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* of Vienna by Professor I. Hilberg, of which three volumes have appeared. When this important work is terminated lovers of St. Jerome will possess the accurate expression of the saint's thoughts, illustrated with the latest lights of research and learning.

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St. John's, Newfoundland.

[7] The Son of God did not come down to earth only for the skin-robe of the Sardinians.

[8] The consent of the world has the force of law.